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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001615

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR JHARRIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: CONTROLLING THE MESSAGE: THE SAG PUSHES RELIGIOUS
ESTABLISHMENT TO EMBRACE TOLERANCE

Classified By: CDA David Rundell for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) (Summary) The Ramadan season in Saudi Arabia saw prominent media coverage of controversial religious opinions that focused attention on the harsh and unyielding interpretations of Islam that have for so long permeated the thinking of the country's religious establishment. Over the past few weeks, however, local and Saudi-owned international media have accorded front-page coverage to statements by senior SAG officials and the Grand Mufti calling on Saudi society to embrace tolerance and resist extremist influence. Although this message is not new, the intensity and talking-point consistency of this commentary has been striking, and appears to reflect government confidence that they now have the upper hand in forcing more moderate perspectives on the country's religious establishment: an idea confirmed by a Riyadh editor with close ties to senior members of the royal family, who told us in no uncertain terms that King Abdullah brooks no opposition from the country's ulema in pursuit of his reforms. (End summary.)

//A Holiday Message from the Supreme Judicial Council//

12. (S) The normally desultory pace of the Saudi media during the month of Ramadan was interrupted by extensive local and international media coverage of the answer Sheikh Saleh al-Luhaidan, president of Saudi Arabia's Supreme Judicial Council, offered in response to a call-in question on the popular radio program "The Holy Qur'an," in which the Sheikh opined that that it would be legally permissible to execute owners of Arab satellite TV channels for broadcasting "immoral" programming. The remarks, which Sheikh al-Luhaidan later said were taken out of context, caused a firestorm of controversy between those who viewed his comment as a step backwards in the struggle against Takfiri religious thinking and those who defended the Sheikh as faithfully interpreting divine scripture. Though never publicly noted, writ large between the lines of this debate was the fact that a significant proportion of Arab satellite channels are owned wholly or in part by members of the Saudi royal family.

13. (S) While al-Luhaidan--sincerely or as a result of government pressure--later publicly backed away from his remarks, it is worth mentioning that a Saudi journalist at a PAS-organized Iftar told emboffs that he had heard that the question to al-Luhaidan was planted by religious conservatives who anticipated the Sheikh's angry and uncompromising response. We cannot ascertain if this story is true, but do note that the host of "The Holy Qur'an" program has been relieved of his broadcasting duties by the Saudi Ministry of Information.

14. (SBU) Soon after the al-Luhaidan controversy, the media was again shaken by international reaction to the comments of Sheikh Saleh Mohammed al-Munajjid, a Saudi-based Syrian religious commentator and in-house Imam for a religious website, who in an infamous disquisition on the inherent "impurity" of mice and the unseemliness of permitting Muslim youth to watch cartoons featuring the creatures, declared that Mickey Mouse would be executed under Shariah law.

//Controlling the Message//

15. (SBU) A more moderate interpretation was not long in coming. On September 29, Saudi-owned, internationally-distributed Arabic daily "Al Sharq al-Awsat" carried as its principal front-page story (carrying over to a full page on the inside) an interview with the Saudi Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz al Sheikh, in which the grand Mufti harshly condemned "extremist thinking" and criticized those Ulema "who appear on talk shows" and issue arbitrary fatwas "on current issues." Al-Sheikh went on to say that in the early days of Islam, any member of the Ulema was entitled to issue a fatwa, as the bulk of these religious dicta generally dealt with non-contentious issues of religious practice.

16. (SBU) "In these times," however, continued the Grand Mufti, when religious interpretations can have significant consequences, fatwas should be issued by a central committee of the Ulema after internal discussion of the matter at hand. As if to dispel any doubt on the issue, al-Sheikh went on to present the al-Saud as the "legitimate leaders of the country, saying that "the senior Ulema cooperate fully with the al-Saud; we complement each other." The Grand Mufti also called on Muslims to practice tolerance with those of other faiths, commenting specifically on the need to have a reasoned dialogue between Sunni and Shia's religious scholars.

17. (SBU) This message of moderation has continued apace since the end of the Eid al-Fitr holiday. The official Saudi Press Agency reported October 15 that the Jeddah-based International Islamic Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) Academy had issued a statement expressing "its deep sorrow" for public disputes among Saudi and Shia's religious scholars, and denouncing "unauthorized fatwas from unqualified persons."

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//From the Fields of Jihad to International Education Week//

18. (SBU) Although unrelated to any fatwa, the enthusiasm for open-minded embrace of other cultures and perspectives on the part of a religious community long known for its fierce opposition to such accommodation was forcefully brought home in comments by former dissident Saudi religious scholar Dr. Salman al-Awda, alleged religious mentor to Osama bin Laden who spent five years in Saudi prisons for extremist activities in the 1990s. Speaking on a recent broadcast of the MBC program "Cornerstone," al-Awda declared his support for the acquisition of critical thinking skills by Arab students (a key element of King Abdullah's educational reform initiative) and said that the Islamic world has much to learn from the US and Japan, "which use the latest technologies to increase what their students learn." He also lauded the salubrious effects of Australian higher education on Saudi students who have studied there.

//The Ruling Family//

19. (S) The issue of the relationship between the Ulema and the Saudi government was the subject of a discussion between the PAS press officer and the chief editor of "Al Riyadh" Arabic daily, Turki al-Sudairi (protect), during an October 14 visit to the paper. Al-Sudairi, who though not a royal is related by blood to the senior SAG leadership and is known for his close personal friendships with the ruling family, told us that King Abdullah "is very tough" with the Ulema and doesn't back down from confronting them if they step out of line. When asked about the al-Luhaidan controversy, al-Sudairi said the king thinks al-Luhaidan is too "mutashaddid" (extremely strict) in his world view, and much prefers the Grand Mufti, whom he deems "very reasonable and moderate."

110. (S) Al-Sudairi also referenced a sardonic editorial he wrote for his newspaper the day of our visit for his newspaper, in which he ridiculed extreme religious interpretations and asked rhetorically if Saudi Arabia should declare war on Muslim states that do not impose the hijab and the veil on women. Had he published the same article ten years ago, he said, a fatwa denouncing him would have been issued the same day, and a threat on his life would have been sent the next. Those days were gone, he said, and hard-liners like al-Luhaidan were being marginalized.

¶11. (S) A meeting with the editor-in-chief (protect) of Saudi Arabic daily "al-Jazeera" on October 21 produced a similar vote of confidence in the country's apparent new direction. In response to our question on whether Saudi Arabia's religious establishment supports King Abdullah's Interfaith Dialogue initiative, the editor, who has run "al-Jazeera" for thirty years, told us that "the majority of Saudis, including religious people," understand the need to counter extremist thinking "and are in favor" of the plan. When asked about those among the religious establishment who oppose it, the editor waved his hand in the air and asserted that such nay-sayers were a minority, as the image of Islam as a religion of "peace and justice" was resonating deeply with the Saudi public, who he characterized as weary of having Islam connected to atrocities such as the bombing of residential housing compounds in Riyadh a few years back.

¶12. (SBU) On October 17, The English-language Arab news carried comments of Saudi Arabia's minister of interior, Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz, during a seminar on Human Rights at Uum al Qura University in Mecca on October 15. Characterizing the imams of Saudi Arabia's 15,000 mosques as "failing miserably" in the fight against extremism, Naif urged intellectuals in Saudi universities to battle against the influences of extreme religious ideology, saying that "intellectual security is no less important than public security." Naif's comments came two weeks after a meeting he held in Jeddah with a cross-section of Saudi society, including religious leaders, on the importance of keeping up with what young Saudis are hearing. "You must take responsibility for your sons," he warned, lest the state be forced to take that responsibility itself.

Rundell